

EDITORIAL: The real test of Common Core is about to begin



This spring students such as Brittney Sanchez and Xavier Timms of Lowell Elementary School in Fresno will be tested on their Common Core knowledge.

CRAIG KOHLRUSS — The Fresno Bee [Buy Photo](#)

This spring, for the first time since its embrace of a new national roadmap for public school instruction, California's students will take their first real Common Core tests.

Brace yourself. The results will just be a baseline, but they may not be pretty. That was the message last week from Michael Kirst, president of the state Board of Education, and he is smart to get out in front of that prospect.

Though Common Core is a major upgrade from the way students here have learned for a generation, surprises in other states have made it vulnerable to needless drama and politicization.

Aimed at better preparing kids for 21st century college coursework and career choices, the new standards push critical thinking and analysis over multiple choice and memorization. The idea is to teach kids to explain and defend their ideas, not just regurgitate answers to study guide questions.

That's a big deal. For decades, education advocates and employers have argued that American students need more rigorous training.

But more rigorous training means more rigorous testing. And in the couple of states that have tried so far to assess kids according to Common Core standards, scores have been sobering.

In New York, the number of “proficient” scores dropped by about 30 percentage points in 2013, its first year of testing. Meanwhile, in Kentucky, pass rates fell from about 80% to less than 50%.

There are asterisks next to those numbers: Neither state used the carefully developed, computerized test that California kids will be taking. Both rushed into high-stakes testing in a way that was much less deliberate and more fraught than the go-slow approach in California.

Neither had the exceptional unity of purpose that this state has fostered, from parents to teachers’ unions to lawmakers to university offices of admission. And the new and old testing methods are apples and oranges; comparing the results is like comparing 3D with a snapshot.

But few things alarm parents like poor test results, and that drop in numbers, however crude, shed a jarringly different light on schools, teachers and children in those states.

Common Core has been relatively uncontroversial so far here, largely because California, which adopted Common Core in 2010, has resisted efforts to rush it. But here as elsewhere, tea party conspiracy theorists mutter that it will be used for socialist indoctrination, and labor leaders warn that it will be a tool to bust teachers’ unions.

Neither is going to happen. And even the fears of “achievement shock” may turn out to be exaggerated; students here did take a practice test last year, just to test the equipment.

But Kirst, a political veteran, knows it can’t hurt to manage expectations. So he minced no words when he told The Sacramento Bee’s editorial board that when elementary, middle school and 11th grade students take the new Smarter Balanced assessment later this year, “the initial results will be shocking.”

Message received. And now, forewarned should be forearmed.

We get that Common Core is a heavier lift in California than in nearly any state in the nation. More than 6.2 million children are being taught here by some 280,000 teachers in about 1,000 school districts. Two-thirds of those kids are poor, in the foster-care system or unable to speak English fluently. That percentage is even higher in some districts, Fresno Unified among them.

So far, only about a third of our teachers have been trained in the new standards, with Common Core math teachers particularly hard to come by. Despite floods of state money — K-12 education soaks up about 40% of the state budget — California’s education spending per pupil ranks near the bottom.

So it won’t come as a surprise if it turns out this spring that we all have massive room for improvement. What will be a failure is if those scores don’t rise.

Hundreds of millions, if not billions, of state and foundation dollars have been made available to facilitate Common Core, and some great development programs are underway at UC Davis, Stanford and elsewhere. School districts should use that new money to get all teachers fully trained, and quickly.

The math teacher shortage should be addressed, too. Though the state cut some popular incentives during the worst of the recession, nothing in the law says that districts can’t offer math teachers more money.

And teachers who can’t or won’t rise to the new standards must be managed out; students have to come before adults.

Kirst estimates it will take five years before we will be able to fairly assess Common Core, but the test of our commitment to our kids begins now.

Ready, California? Start the clock.

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